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Reflection: [Pastoral Excellence](#)



From fragmentation to integration

Move from a fragmented to an integrated system of support and services for pastors.

by [Kenneth L. Carder](#)

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Recently, I have been involved in two discussions, each seeking answers to the following questions: What are the essential qualities of faithful and fruitful pastoral leaders? And who is responsible for assessing and forming those qualities in candidates for ministry? In one discussion, the participants were seminary faculty members and, in the other, seminary administrators and judicatory leaders.

In both discussions, the essential qualities of excellent ministry that we sought to identify fell into three categories:

- **Theological/ecclesial imagination** grounded and formed in Scripture and the Christian tradition,
- **Character** formed by grace experienced in practices and relationships within Christian community, and
- **Skills** developed and applied toward the goal of shaping communities with theological/ecclesial imagination, grace-formed character, and skills in service to God's present and coming reign.

The specific contents that fall under each of these areas — that is, the specific knowledge, character, and skills required for excellent ministry — merit continued conversation and discernment. Across the nation, Sustaining Pastoral Excellence programs are already engaged in this discussion and are helping to create needed dialogue among the various institutions responsible for the calling forth, forming, assessing, and placement of pastoral leaders.

In our recent discussions, seminary faculty and judicatory leaders raised a critical challenge confronting efforts to identify, form, and sustain excellence in ministry. As many have observed, our current approach to leadership formation is fragmented. It is broken into many small pieces. Our task, the faculty and judicatory leaders agreed, is to move from that fragmented system of leadership

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formation to one that is holistic and integrated.

Our current fragmented understanding of leadership formation is premised, at least in part, on the notion that knowledge, character, and skill are separate and distinct qualities that can best be developed in isolation from one another by different institutions. Under that understanding, seminaries are responsible for knowledge, the individual is responsible for character, and the church bears the burden for skill development. Such a conception, or misconception, of leadership formation, however, distorts the meaning of personhood, negates Christian community, and undermines the very qualities of excellent ministry.

Knowledge, character, and skills are inseparable. Yes, a body of knowledge does exist that is essential for the formation of a theological/ecclesial imagination. Pastoral leaders must *know* the Scriptures. They must *know* the doctrines, liturgies, and practices of the Tradition, and the contemporary cultural, historical, and global context. Excellent ministry requires understanding the intellectual content of the Christian faith and the insights to appropriate the theological insights in the current contexts.

Yet, knowledge is not sufficient for faithful ministry when it is not accompanied by character formed by grace experienced in practices within Christian community. What we learn and what we do with what we learn are related to the content of our character and experience. Some things we do not know because we lack the character to understand.

For more than 40 years, from the time I first studied it in seminary, the Book of Job has been an important resource for my intellectual understanding of theodicy. Over the years, my knowledge of that book, derived from the tools of exegesis, has enriched my preaching, pastoral care, and teaching. But I never learned so much about Job as I did more than four years ago when I suffered a near-fatal heart attack. During months of recovery, I gained insights that had escaped me when Job was an abstract theological treatise on theodicy. My intellectual knowledge of the Book of Job, its content and context, was radically informed and transformed by my own experience of suffering and its meaning.

In one of the recent discussions, a judicatory leader affirmed that knowledge, character, and skills are indeed essential for faithful and fruitful ministry. But, he quickly added, “I have rarely seen the three in the same person.” His comment prompted participants to cite numerous examples of pastors who had exemplary intellectual knowledge but who violated boundaries, manipulated others, mismanaged their anger, or otherwise lacked integrity. Others shared stories of pastors who seemed healthy and whole but lacked the knowledge to teach and form congregations in the gospel. Illustrations abounded of pastors who seemed to know Scripture and tradition and who were “good people” but were deficient in the “practical skills” of ministry.

Many factors contribute to our fragmented approach to the formation and sustaining of excellent ministry. One is the “silo” mentality and practice. We urgently need ongoing conversation among leaders of the institutions responsible for calling forth, forming, deploying, and sustaining pastoral leaders. Local churches, colleges and seminaries, judicatory leaders, denominational agencies, ordained clergy and lay persons all have responsibility for the knowledge, character and skills necessary for excellent ministry.

The Sustaining Pastoral Excellence projects offer one of our best hopes for making this conversation happen. They are strategically poised to foster theological/ecclesial imagination grounded and formed in Scripture and Tradition; grace-formed character experienced in Christian practices and community; and skills in shaping communities with theological/ecclesial imagination, grace-formed character, and skills in service to God’s reign. The SPE projects include a variety of academic and ecclesial institutions and leaders. The more conversation takes place across institutional boundaries, the more likely fragmentation will give way to a holistic, integrated understanding of what constitutes excellence and how it is formed.

